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Asylum, refugees and IDPs: the challenges of social cohesion in Armenia

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Introduction

Issues related to the situation of *asylum seekers, refugees* and *IDPs* in the Republic of Armenia (RA) are discussed in this paper. State policy implemented in this direction is analyzed, and recommendations with the view of filling the gaps are made. This paper is based on policy documents of the field, researches and publications of mass media.

Asylum seekers in the RA

Relations of foreign citizens and stateless people seeking asylum in the RA are regulated by the RA Law “On Refugees”, adopted in 1999, and the RA new Law on “Refugees and Asylum”, adopted in 2008.

According to the data¹ of the State Migration Service (SMS) of the RA, the number of foreign citizens who applied for asylum was 1,672 people in 1999 - 2009. The majority of asylum seekers arrived to Armenia from Iraq. Nearly one thousand citizens of Iraq were granted temporary protection in Armenia in 2003-2009. In 2009, the number of asylum applications decreased significantly: from 275 in 2006, it dropped to 48 in 2009. Apart from the citizens of Iraq, a significant number of applications were submitted by the citizens of Lebanon (in 2006, 279 citizens of Lebanon applied for asylum in Armenia) and Georgia (in 2008, 125 Georgians asked for asylum). During 2010-2012, another 720 persons applied for asylum, out of whom 255 were recognized as refugees and have been granted asylum, 63 persons were rejected, and the processing of cases of 70 persons was terminated.

The inflow from Syria to Armenia has become active in the beginning of 2012, when the situation in Syria became critical, and approximately 6,500 Syrian Armenians had moved to Armenia² by January 1, 2013. Currently their number exceeds 10,000³: However, some of them applied to the SMS for asylum. This can be explained by the fact that those arriving from Syria consider the SMS as an institution that is responsible for providing temporary housing only. Thus, those who have no relatives or friends in Armenia, with whom they can share lodging, or those who do not have financial means for purchasing or renting a house, apply to the SMS.

According to the information provided by the SMS, 784 people (304 families) applied for asylum in Armenia as of September 1, 2013. The State Migration Service of the RA provided 136 people with housing. Moreover 38 people were accommodated at the “Reception Center” SNPO, 19 persons were accommodated in a dormitory and 42 persons in Social House in Darbnik. They are functioning under the SMS, where their living is covered by the RA state budget. Besides, different individuals provided flats/housing to additional 37 persons⁴.

In general, the RA Ministry of Diaspora coordinates the activities carried out with the Syrian Armenians. A working group dealing with issues of the Syrian Armenians has been functioning in the Ministry since the summer of 2012. The working group has drafted the Action Plan⁵ on support to the

¹ The number of foreign citizens applied for asylum in the Republic of Armenia: Available at http://www.smsmta.am/?menu_id=61, accessed on 11 September, 2013.

² Report of the Ministry of Diaspora on Assistance of Armenians from Siria by 29 January 2013.

³ Speech of the Diaspora Minister H. Hakobyan presented at Diaspora Ministerial Conference on International Dialogue on Migration 2013 in Geneva 18-19 June 2013.

⁴ Report of the SMS at the session of the Interdepartmental Committee in charge of supporting solutions of key issues of Syrian Armenians. Available at: http://www.smsmta.am/?show_news&news_id=222, accessed on 26 September, 2013.

⁵ 2013 Action Plan of the working group of the Interdepartmental Committee on coordination of Syrian Armenians' issues.

solution of the issues of the Syrian Armenians. Regular sessions of the Interdepartmental Committee⁶ on Coordination of Syrian Armenians' Issues are organized. Representatives of various RA state bodies, NGOs dealing with the issues of the Syrian Armenians, and representatives of the Apostolic Church take part in the sessions.

Despite the actives⁷ already carried out, according to the report of the Committee, there are still unsettled issues or partially solved issues, such as the provision of health care, employment, child care and food supplies, clothing, and Eastern Armenian language lessons⁸.

According to the publications on Syrian Armenians in the mass media, positive attitude has been formed in the Armenian society, including in the level of local communities, towards the issues and needs of the Syrian Armenians. Still, opinions can be heard that issues of the refugees, who were forcibly deported from Azerbaijan to Armenia about 25 years ago, are left out.

Refugees, forcibly deported from Azerbaijan in 1988-1992

During 1988-1991, Armenia hosted approximately 420,000 refugees. The vast majority of these persons (360,000, or 12%) were from Azerbaijan, and the rest arrived from other parts of the former USSR, including Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kirgizia, Abkhazia, etc⁹. Due to problems with integration, 1/3 refugees later left Armenia, mostly for Russia and some for other countries (UNDP, 2009, pp. 35, 36).

Since the late 1990s, when it became clear that a safe and voluntary return of Armenian refugees displaced from Azerbaijan is unlikely, Armenia has adopted “*a full-scale refugee integration policy*”¹⁰. That was a transition to comprehensive and radical approach towards the solution of refugee issues that replaced the day-to-day approach that dominated in the 1990s. The policy based on such foundations becomes a primary goal for the effective integration of refugees in Armenia and their naturalization.

The implementation of this policy greatly depends on solving a number of vital issues that can be grouped as follows:

- a. ***socio-economic*** – improvement of living conditions of refugees, broader access to social infrastructures, higher unemployment rate and increased welfare, etc;
- b. ***legal-political*** – adoption of laws to ensure legal protection of refugees' rights and interests as well as political and legal guarantees for implementation of these laws;
- c. ***spiritual-cultural*** – ensuring adequate conditions for the Armenian language learning, good educational opportunities, broad-based access to the spiritual and cultural wealth of the nation, adoption of traditions and customs of the Armenian society;
- d. ***moral-psychological*** – treatment of moral and emotional stress caused by forced displacement; overcoming a feeling of being a stranger in a new environment; establishment of new social links; recovery of self-esteem; perception of behavioral nuances of people around; improvement of self-protection mechanisms;

⁶ RA Prime Minister Decree on Establishment of Interdepartmental Committee on Coordination of Syrian Armenians on 14 January, 2013, N 9-U.

⁷ Shoghikyan H. *New benefits for Syrian Armenians. The Government considers it expedient to remove all fines and penalties.* Available at: <http://www.azatutyun.am/content/article/24749273.html>. Published on 24 October, 2012.

⁸ Report of the Ministry of Diaspora on Assistance of Armenians from Siria by 29 January 2013.

⁹ The “Concept for the Policy of State Regulation of Migration in the Republic of Armenia” was adopted as Appendix to the RA Government Session Record Decision # 51 dated December 30, 2010, p. 5

¹⁰ Speech of G. Yeganyan, Head of State Migration Service of Armenia, at the Living together summit, 12-14 March, 2008, London, UK. Available at http://www.smsmta.am/?show_performance&performance_id=14. Accessed on 21 September, 2013

- e. ***relating to personal mentality*** – most refugees fear that upon the acquisition of the Armenian citizenship, they will lose protection and assistance of the state and international organizations. Besides, there is another problem: 60% of refugees have abandoned their property, homes and savings in Azerbaijan. Until the present day, they haven't received any indemnity for it.

It is noteworthy that these factors had a diverse impact during the entire course of refugees' integration. Actually, since 2003, the basic problems in the process of integration of refugees are their difficult socio-economic conditions, which intensify their social isolation and the feeling of being forgotten by the state and international organizations.

Various surveys conducted in Armenia in the past few years demonstrate that refugees are much more vulnerable than the local population, particularly in the following aspects:

- according to the preliminary estimates, over 5.5 thousand refugee families are not provided with permanent housing, and the housing problem requires urgent attention;
- the actual unemployment rate is 2-3 times higher;
- higher level of impoverishment (unfavorable housing conditions, limited access to health services and primary education);
- lower living standards and lower incomes.

Despite the abovementioned, researches¹¹ show, that since 2004-2005, the refugees deported from Azerbaijan in 1988-1992 are no longer viewed as the primary beneficiaries of the programs on social assistance to the population of the Republic of Armenia in all the areas, but the mainly of the programs on shelter provision (including the programs implemented with the assistance of international institutions), or as a group with a vulnerable social status in need of specific policy approach.

Such is the state of affairs in the area of healthcare, where refugees are not viewed as a special target group for any state program on healthcare, and, as a consequence, there is no specific statistical information with regard to the inclusion of that group into similar programs.

As it also became clear with regards to the inclusion of refugees into the state employment programs, despite the fact that refugees continue to be viewed as members of a non-competitive group on the national labour market, and a provision to grant priority rights is included into the state employment programs, since 2006 no statistics is kept in the database regarding the participants to such programs of the various social groups of population that are considered to be non-competitive on the labour market.

It can be concluded that at least in the past 7-8 years, the individuals deported from Azerbaijan in 1988-1992 are also no longer considered to be the primary beneficiaries of social assistance programs, implemented on the basis of family poverty evaluation. The representatives of that group are also included in such programs on common grounds, which is, if they fall under the criteria determined for the inclusion of the RA citizens into such programs.

The analysis has shown that in the current system of education, there are no special target programs aimed at solving the education-related problems of refugees, or programs, where this group is viewed as the primary beneficiary group. In the opinion of the responsible officials in the area of education, there are no specific issues in the system of education as regards to the refugees.

¹¹ Gevorgyan V. (2012) Social integration of refugees deported from Azerbaijan in 1988-1992 in the Republic of Armenia. Available at: <http://www.smsmta.am/upload/Integration.pdf>. Accessed on 10 September, 2013

Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)

During 1991-1993, as a result of the conflict in Kharabakh on the territory bordering with Azerbaijan, which involved 186 settlements of 5 Armenian regions, approximately 72 thousand persons who became internally displaced persons due to the military clashes (UNDP, 2009, p. 40). After the ceasefire in 1994, the majority of these persons returned to the places of their permanent residence. A comparatively small number settled in new places, the rest permanently emigrated from the country.

Complexities of the problems of refugees from Azerbaijan and people displaced as a result of the 1988 earthquake have overshadowed the issues of IDPs who emerged due to military operations in the border settlements.

According to the Global Overview on IDP's published annually by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 8,400 persons are still IDPs in Armenia (0.3% of the total population).

In 2002-2004, the Migration Agency under the Ministry of Territorial Administration of Armenia in the framework of a joint effort and direct involvement of the Norwegian Refugee Council undertook the registration of the IDPs in 5 regions, that included 186 settlements and 65,647 households (237,730 persons residing in those settlements) at the border with Azerbaijan. The IDP allocation mapping had been carried out, as well as a study regarding the willingness of the IDPs to return to their original places of inhabitation (GovProject, 2008, p. 4).

In fact, the first fundamental document on the issue was the Project "On Assistance to the Return of Internally Displaced Persons Residing in Border Settlements of Armenia to their Places of Origin", which was approved by the RA Government in 2008 and has been built on the results of the abovementioned mapping survey.

According to the Project, the Resettlement component targets nearly 2,608 persons (almost 1,005 households) supporting the return of these persons to their permanent places of residence and their resettlement in their own reconstructed or renovated houses. The Project aims at assisting the return of 626 internally displaced households which expressed willingness to move back to their permanent places of residence; assisting 379 families that still contemplate the option of return; facilitating the return of those who are on their way to return; and supporting the integration of population in the border areas. The activities to be implemented in the scope of the Project conditionally contain Resettlement and Recovery components. The total cost of the Project is USD 38, 53 million. It was supposed to be carried out in 2008-2010 at the regional and community levels in the light of the joint efforts of international donors and other NGOs with due regard to the specificity of different approaches.

However, due to the lack of financial means, the project has not been implemented yet. In September 2010, the Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General on the Human Rights of IDPs, Mr. Walter Kälin arrived in Armenia. The abovementioned Project was discussed during the meeting, and it was decided that it should be reviewed taking into account the needs of the IDPs. This is due to the fact that the data of the Project, approved in 2008, was old. With the view of reviewing the Programme, the SMS approached the Armenian office of the UNCHR for assistance in the implementation of the activities through the UN offices located in Armenia. So far concrete steps have not been undertaken.

Nevertheless, according to the RA Government Decree N1856-A "On Allocation of the sums" of December 22, 2011, it was decided to allocate a lump-sum of 708 million AMD¹² to organize financial assistance to the families of forcibly displaced persons from Artsvashen¹³ community on August 18, 1992 due to military actions¹⁴.

¹² Armenian currency

¹³ Artsvashen is an Armenian exclave inside Azerbaijan territory.

¹⁴ "Report on the most important achievements recorded in the field of migration management in 2007-2011" prepared by the SMS. Available at: http://www.smsmta.am/?menu_id=101. Accessed on 20.09.2013

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